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Hutton: Sympathy for the 'Falcon'

By Scott Sublett
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NEW YORK — One thing you have to admit about Timothy Hutton is that he does not mince words. Sometimes he sounds as though he might strangle on them, but he speaks his mind. This can be a problem when you've just played Christopher Boyce in "The Falcon and the Snowman," a picture currently doing good business in theaters around the country.

In the middle 1970s, Boyce, a former seminarian, sold U.S. satellite secrets to the KGB. Some hold that he did it for the money, some say for the thrill. Others, Mr. Hutton among them, see Boyce as a misguided idealist who made a grave mistake, but who did it because he was honestly shocked by CIA covert operations he allegedly had discovered while handling highly classified information at a U.S. defense contractor.

While preparing to play the controversial young spy, Mr. Hutton conversed with Boyce by telephone every day for three months. Even now, Mr. Hutton contacts him regularly.

"I spoke to him the other day and told him how things were going," says Mr. Hutton. "He was very [eager] to see the movie, so I'm trying to arrange that. He's very excited about the whole thing."

Boyce is, of course, in jail. Mr. Hutton is in sort of a trap himself, submitting nervously but cooperatively to the ritual of publicity interviews — an ordeal his "Falcon" co-star Sean Penn refuses to abide.

Mr. Hutton's manner today is almost somber. The clothing on his lanky body is stylishly baggy in cut, but the spirit, textures and colors are classically modest and business-like. He wears black, white and shades of gray, with bulky black oxfords on his feet. With his pale skin and dark hair, the only sparks of color come from his crisp, blue eyes, and a boyishly whimsical red baseball cap with "49ers"

emblazoned across the crown. He grew up in California but his earnest appearance somehow suggests an Ivy League Quaker. His father was comic leading man Jim Hutton, who died in 1979.

He genuinely likes Boyce, and admits that this has created problems. From letters he has received and remarks made by journalists, Mr. Hutton concludes that many have trouble accepting his involvement in what they might call an apology for two traitors.

"It's very difficult to be in contact

it wasn't that different from what he did later."

Boyce clearly considered his personal moral judgments to be above the law even then. Ultimately, he vandalized his country's defenses. One wonders why he wanted such a story told on film.

"I guess he just wants this to make people understand his life a little bit more, and not justify what he did, but understand the person before the act of treason," Mr. Hutton says.

When discussing Boyce, politics, and almost anything controversial, Mr. Hutton's voice is startlingly quiet. The sinews in his neck stretch taut, and one senses that he is squeezing, squeezing the words out, uncomfortably aware that some listeners will take offense. The word "treason" in particular makes him mumble.

"It's very difficult for me to say," he admits, "because I know him in such a different way. I just can't... it's very difficult to accept that word as a label that's been put on him for what he did."

Did Boyce see himself as a traitor?

"I don't know if he sees — a traitor to what? I think he sees himself as someone who did not want to do any one harm," says Mr. Hutton.

"He wanted to make people aware of things that were going on in this world. People were being manipulated, controlled. He learned some things that hurt him very deeply. He wanted to do something about it. He felt that strongly. It's very difficult for people to accept, because most people assume that a 22-year-old, 23-year-old does something like what he did just for the hell of it. Because he hated his country, or because he wanted money. And that's not true. People don't realize that you can be 22, 23 years old and be politically aware. Morally aware. And so I hope that people see that in this movie. Again, without accepting what he did.

He felt very strongly about the people who spoke out against what appeared to be normal government practices. It was very disturbing to him, for instance, when his best friends from school would return from the [Vietnam] war with blown-off legs.

"And I think people should appreciate not what he did, but the person who did what he did. I mean, it's very rare that you find a 22-, 23-year-old kid who is trying to get his friends active in discussions about world affairs."

Active in discussions of world affairs, certainly; Boyce talked a lot with some KGB agents. In any case, what Mr. Hutton, and the film, do not mention is that Boyce subsequently escaped from prison, robbed some banks, and 18 months later was caught and thrown into jail again. This is not exactly a lovable characteristic, which may be why the film ignores it altogether.

Mr. Hutton considers his own generation woefully deficient in knowledge of international politics.

"You know, when I was 20 it was 1980, and it was just so completely

rare to run into people my age who were talking about things that were going on in the world," he says. "Now I'm 24, and I don't find that any of my friends who are my age are aware of what's going on in El Salvador. I was talking to this friend of mine the other day, who's a 23-year-old, and I said, 'What would you do if you were drafted and had to go down to Central America?' And this is a kid who just graduated from Harvard, said, 'Why? What do you mean?' I said, 'Well you know there's a war down there and everything.' 'Oh, oh, yes, right. No, no, no, that problem's been cleared up, hasn't it?'"

"The Falcon and the Snowman" is not the first time Mr. Hutton has played a controversial character. In "Daniel," a film version of E.L. Doctorow's novel about Julius and Ethel Rosenberg — the controversial atom spies of the '50s — he played their son, who searches for evidence that the parents are innocent. Mr. Hutton's character was fictional, but "Daniel" did have counterparts in the real-life sons of the Rosenbergs. Mr. Hutton did not meet with them

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as he did Boyce, because "Daniel's" director, Sidney Lumet, preferred that he did not.

Most moviegoers associate Mr. Hutton with dramatic roles, and for good reason. His first film role, in "Ordinary People," won him a best supporting actor Oscar for his portrayal of an anguished suburban adolescent. He went on to star as a rebellious military-school student in "Taps" (which also featured his "Falcon" co-star, Mr. Penn), and as a young scientist in "Iceman."

His first comedy bears the enigmatic title "Turk 182."

"I mean, I think it's a comedy," he says. "For me it is. I smile in the movie."

And he smiles his boyish, guileless smile for the first time in the course of the interview. He says the film is opening Feb. 15, "in about a zillion theaters."

"It's a very funny movie. The character has this brother, this fireman here in New York, who saves a little girl in a fire while he's off duty. The city won't pay for his hospital costs — he was injured in the fire — and I get [angry] about it and become a graffiti artist. Put my logo, 'Turk 182,' all over the city and try to mess up the mayor's re-election. And become sort of this hero of New York City."

He says his "Turk 182" character is "a kid who just thinks he can do anything, and goes around with a twinkle in his eye and gets away with it. I even have a little love scene in it, which is nice."

The movie is a departure for Mr. Hutton. He is not noted for playing the kind of teen-oriented scripts that occupy the time of other actors his age. He turned down a role in "Grease II," and the offer of a part in "Where the Boys Are" (a remake of a 1960 film that starred his father). One wonders if Mr. Hutton is tired of playing "young men of conscience."

"I'll never be tired of playing old men, young men, middle [age] men, with conscience," he says with surprising vehemence. "I think more characters should have a social conscience."

Like Christopher Boyce?